

[A culture on the brink of change](#)

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Friday, 27 January 2012

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Orange dirt holds to our skin, secured by the dry sweat from a day of trekking through rainforests, down dusty roads, and past rivers, waterfalls and elephants. Our allegedly English-speaking guide disappears down the hill, leaving us alone in the empty village. He returns 20 minutes later, with his family of 10 at his heels and the key to his hut.



[The once-reclusive Bunong tribe in Mondulkiri province is beginning to open up to new technology and different cultures. DEBORAH SECCOMBE](#)



- [Prev](#)
- [1 of 3](#)
- [Next](#)

“Where is the toilet?” we ask.

“Sorry, ma’am. The toilet is the jungle,” Ly Orm replies.

Ly Orm is part of the Bunong tribe – an ethnic minority in Mondulkiri province, near the border of Vietnam, which is believed to date back 2,000 years. The 27-year-old Bunong man and his family are among 60 Bunong people living in Burang village, close to Mondulkiri’s capital Sen Monorom.

Though Ly Orm and his family are Cambodian, he is one of the few who speaks Khmer, and the only one who speaks English. The Bunong people have their own, unwritten language and

their history is passed down through oral tradition. According to Ly Orm, the few Bunong elders who could write in their language died before passing on the knowledge.

“All this information is being lost. The traditional ways are vanishing fast and the elders who know the tradition are very rare,” says French linguist Sylvain Vogel, who recently published a study *Aspects de la Culture Traditionnelle des Bunoong du Mondulkiri*. His book, published in French and Khmer, provides insight into the culture, traditions and language of one of Cambodia’s overlooked ethnic minorities.

Blaise Kilian, coordinator of the Creative Industries Support Programme at the UNESCO Phnom Penh office approached Vogel to conduct the study. He says Vogel’s work is important because any form of publication on the Bunong culture is scarce compared with other “popular” topics like Angkor.

Vogel studied the Bunong people for 15 years, living with them on and off during that time. “I was impressed with the diversity of Bunong traditional oral literature, as with the consistency that their culture shows. There is a way to speak with the gods, a way to speak with the dead, a way to speak when hunting in the forest,” he says.

The Bunong people believe the forest is a spiritual entity, with each rock, tree and waterfall possessing a soul. Their culture strives to keep man and nature in balance.

According to 23 year-old Bunong fisherman Norb, “Everything belongs to everyone in our village. When you have food you give it to me. When I have food I give it to you.”

The inside of the straw hut was dark. The only source of light was a small flame from a lantern that hung above our heads. Ly Orm’s sister lit a fire in the centre of the hut and started to prepare dinner – a variety of rice with beef and yam, beef and bamboo and for the less adventurous, just plain beef. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness and the embers brightened the room, we saw more of the Bunong home. Empty rice wine jars lined the side of the hut, dried corn hung from the ceiling, pots and tools cluttered one corner and in the other sat a small, old TV and DVD player. It wasn’t long after that we heard the roar of a generator burst into life and the family flocked around the TV for karaoke and soapies. Modernity has stretched its legs into Burang village. “Nothing is how it used to be,” says Norb.

Life for the Bunong people has started to change. While we rough it in a primitive straw hut, a few other houses are a step up in construction and only three to four years old. The newer homes give way to the classic house form. One entrance is painted in yellow, red and green. We ask Ly Orm if these colours are significant to the Bunong. “Yes, yes, yes... colours... yes,” he says. You be the judge.

Norb is an example of modernity among the Bunong. He went to a private school in Sen Monorom to learn English and he knows how to use the internet. “I can learn everything, I can adapt,” he says, adding that young Bunong people don’t see the change as a problem.

Like Norb and Ly Orm, most Bunong people wear western clothes; jeans, hoodies, sandals and beanies.

Maybe we can be described as girls of comfort, but in our logic we thought toilets and running water would take precedence over western clothes and television.

“Mobile phones are used for security. Phones and TV help with communication and information. They also provide cheap entertainment. Running water and toilets were not problems in the past with abundant forest, rules for where to go to the toilet, and no big villages. The Bunong are interested in new music and films, and learning about the world, whether western or Asian,” says Has Thoeun.

Has Thoeun is the associate director of International Cooperation Cambodia, an NGO which works closely with Bunong and which, it claims on its website, is “committed to serving the least-served across the Kingdom of Cambodia.”

But it is not just Western influence that is making its mark. Norb says that it’s Khmer-Cambodians exploiting the land for profit. He and his cousin have just come back from fishing with empty nets. “There was still a lot of fish in my grandparent’s days, but now there is hardly any left,” he says.

“When we fish, we only take as much as we need to feed the village. But when the Khmer come, they take more than they need.”

Besides a shortage of fish, Norb says a lot of trees in Pu Tang have either been sucked dry of their resin or cut down. Resin is the Bunong’s most important source of cash.

Because of their spiritual ties with the forest, Bunong don’t think anyone can claim ownership of the land, making them vulnerable to investors.

“The environment has changed a lot in Mondulkiri and other remote provinces over the past years. Increased access due to the development of infrastructure, new investors from abroad and from the lowlands have placed Indigenous customs, languages and ways of life under strong pressure,” Killian says.

The once remote and secluded minority tribe has gradually etched their way into the broader community. But while their presence is occasionally noticed, there is still a big void of communication between the Khmer and Bunong .

ICC has been supporting the minority since 2001 when they launched the Research, Education and Development initiative. READ has Bunong staff on their team, thus giving them a unique connection with and insight to Bunong culture.

They have been teaching the Bunong how to use the computer and internet, explaining basic health principles like sleeping under mosquito nets, and providing them with rice.

Against the backdrop of these changes, Killian says the preservation of Bunong culture and way of life is under pressure.

“The younger generations of the indigenous people are even more tempted by modernity. It is therefore important to document and to safeguard when possible these customs and languages as the possibility of their disappearance is real on the medium term,” he says.

Vogel has written a second book on the Bunong oral tradition which will be published in February.

“Nobody besides a small number of academics seems to worry about so many cultures and languages disappearing unrecorded,” Vogel says.

Some Bunong people have expressed a similar concern, saying they want to share their ways with the outside world to help preserve it.

Norb says, “When the foreigners first came to our village no-one could talk to them to explain who we were and what we do. I decided to learn English so when the foreigner comes I can tell our story.”

Squeak, squeak, squeak. The three-year-old Bunong son of Ly Orm’s sister runs around on a dirt patch outside his mother’s hut in western sneakers that squeak with each step. Regardless of the language barrier and the 20 year age gap, the boy is determined to gain our approval by trying to win a friendly fight with his older brother. The two tackle and charge, every now and then glancing to see if we are still captivated by them.

Though fully aware of our foreign presence, in their innocence they remain unaware of the change and outside influences that are building momentum around them. The future and direction of the Bunong culture may lie in the small hands of young boys and girls like these.

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